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ABSTRACT

Most studies on the history of educational ideas have focused on what influential educational theorists and policy-makers have said and written at particular times, constructing a "view from the top." The project from which this article is derived focused on the ways theoretical debates have been "lived" by teachers in New Zealand, particularly how teachers have encountered and dealt with the various waves of "progressive" (or child-centered) educational thought. Up to 170 teachers age 25 to 90 will be interviewed for a book intended to create snapshots of particular periods (for example, the 1960s-70s and "neo-progressivism"). This article looks at the 1940s-50s through the voices of kindergarten teachers working at the time; following a brief overview on the structure and history of early childhood education in New Zealand, the article moves into a detailed examination of this period and its substantive transformation of progressive ideas (such as free play) into practice. Numerous quotes reveal teachers' experiences with the transition from time-tabled school routines to child-directed activities, and from management by private ladies' associations to more direct government involvement. Their comments reveal the complexity of interplay between "top down" support and direction and "bottom up" reactions. Contains 17 references. (EV)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD HERSTORIES: AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ON THE CHANGING EDUCATIONAL IDEAS OF TEACHERS IN NEW ZEALAND

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The project

Most studies in the history of educational ideas have focused on what influential educational theorists and policy-makers have said and written at particular times. Such studies have constructed a 'view from the top.' They do not tell us much about the educational ideas and practices of 'ordinary' teachers. We are interested in the ways theoretical debates have been 'lived' by teachers, and are particularly interested in the impact of various waves and strands of 'progressive' (or child-centred) educational ideas on teachers, and the ways in which teachers have encountered and dealt with these ideas in their everyday practice. A history of educational ideas which relies too heavily on policy documents and teacher-education texts can imply that teachers have passively absorbed what policy-makers and teacher-educators have told them. The balance between prescription from 'above' and innovation from 'below' is not clear cut. In New Zealand there has certainly been innovation in classroom practice from 'below' but there has also been directions for change from the Government. For example, in the past few years there has been a considerable turmoil of change in relation to curriculum policy throughout all sectors of education, much of it imposed from above and reacted to from below. However, putting direction into practice is

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not so easy and may be accommodated, resisted and/or subverted by individual teachers in practice (Anyon 1983). The 'official' texts of education history do not capture the everyday realities of teacher accommodation or resistance to new educational ideas, education policy, or the impact of children or parents on the curriculum. Nor do such texts capture the grassroots changes from below or the ways in which new ideas from teachers begin in action, often without a name or theory attached, but with a sense of being a different approach to a problem or situation. In interviews with teachers it is possible to track these beginnings through to being 'named' and/or becoming accepted practice or policy - or of course being rejected.

The project is to write a book on the changing ideas of teachers in New Zealand for which we are interviewing up to 170 teachers from aged 25 to 90 years about their life in education, in the classroom and the early childhood centre (Middleton and May 1994). The objective of the book is to create snapshots of educational theories and debates as lived by teachers within particular periods, in early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools, over the past seventy years.

- 1920s-1940s: The interwar years and the beginnings of progressivism
- 1940s-1950s: The postwar years and progressivism enters the mainstream
- 1960s-1970s: 'Neo-progressivism' - liberation politics and radical rethinks
- 1980s -1990s: 'New right' accountability and a challenge to progressivism

Twenty of the interviews have been with teachers who work in sessional kindergartens with 3-4 year olds. This paper looks at the just one period of time - the 1940s-1950s, and lets some of these kindergarten teachers tell of the changes they experienced, they created, they had imposed, and in some cases fought against.

Teachers have always 'used' theory, since every 'act' of teaching - whether engaged in out of 'habit' or 'rule-following' or informed by an explicitly worked through theory - is unconsciously or consciously selected from a repertoire of strategies which are discursively, biographically, historically and culturally constructed. In our wider project we want to introduce our students to educational theories as teachers experience, choose, and live them in the everyday settings in which they live, think, and work. Student teachers often experience and describe a gap between theory and practice. Our text should help close this gap by offering students examples of 'theories-in-action' in the everyday educational world. In this we hope to model for them the ways in which education professionals from different times, age-groups, cultures, geographical locations and socio-economic backgrounds have - within the possibilities and constraints of their circumstances - selected from the ideas available to construct their own educational theories. This should help our students to deconstruct the educational and other possibilities of their own lives and to view themselves as active and creative educational theorists, who will not merely mimic what has gone

before, but create new amalgams of the theories and concepts which they encounter in the course of their professional lives to create new pedagogies and educational strategies.

New Zealand early childhood background

It will be useful before proceeding, to provide a brief overview of early childhood education in New Zealand. There is currently a diverse range of early childhood services, all of which exist in partnership with the Government to provide early childhood care and education to a considerable proportion of the 0-4 year old population (i.e. 11 % under one's; 26 % one to two's; 46 % two to three's; 79 % three to four's; 96 % four to five's year olds) (Ministry of Education 1994). At five children go to school. Unlike public schools, early childhood services have never been 'owned' by the Government, but exist in a regulatory and funding partnership with Government. The free kindergarten, whose teachers are the focus of this paper, is the oldest service, established in the late nineteenth century, and has received government support since 1909. Up until the late 1940s, the level of Government support was minimal and kindergartens relied on fundraising and charitable contributions for survival. Historically, each service negotiated its own partnership with Government; the success of which depended on the political mood of the time and the extent to which that early childhood services could be 'packaged' as a means of meeting agreed political outcomes. From the late 1940s, when the idea of early childhood education was politically acclaimed as a 'good thing', successive Governments provided increasing funding and support (May 1990). The consequence was that kindergartens for 3-4 year olds were eventually funded almost all their costs. Other services were not so successful and, for example, childcare centres received no direct support until 1983. The 1989 Before Five policies brought all services into a similar regulatory partnership with a funding formula based on the age of the child and the length of attendance. Kindergartens currently cater for about 45 % of early childhood provision, but in the mid 1940s there were only about 2500 free kindergarten places which catered for about 10 % of children in the age group (Mason 1944). There were few other options available and most children were not attending any early childhood service. During the late 1940s and 1950s provision began expanding with the postwar baby boom.

Kindergarten teachers are the most cohesive group of early childhood practitioners in New Zealand and of course their story stretches back the furthest. The thrust of change for kindergartens since the 1920s has been four fold:

Firstly, the transformation of the kindergarten curriculum from one characterised by formality and timetables, towards child centred progressive educational ideas embodying self expression, choice and free play;

secondly, the shifting role of the kindergarten teacher from that of self sacrificing and dedicated 'girls' with a philanthropic mission, to political women of the teaching profession;

thirdly, the increasing role of mothers and parents in the management of the kindergartens and as partners in the programme. Kindergartens were originally established by the well to do as a service for poor children in which mothers were to be 'educated'; and

fourthly, the emergence of a range of other early childhood services which kindergartens have gradually come to accommodate as other options for parents.

This paper constructs a scenario 'debate' by teachers of life and learning in the kindergarten around the issue of 'freeplay' during the 1940s and 1950s. Kindergartens were moving out of their earlier philanthropic role, and into a closer and more lucrative partnership with government, but in exchange for an increased Government voice in their daily operations.

Scenario: "Let the children be free" - the 1940s-1950s

New Zealand may have been distant from the beginnings of progressive educational ideas in Europe but was it was no backwater (May 1992). The amalgam of new psychological and sociological insights into child development, adult neurosis, classroom management and the nature of learning and knowledge coming from theorists such as Freud and Piaget, and educators such as Dewey, Montessori, McMillan and Isaacs found a small but receptive audience in New Zealand. From the 1920s there were strong links with international progressive education organisations, and throughout the education system there were individual teachers and educators trying to teach and work with children in ways that allowed more child activity and choice, fostered creativity and enabled self expression. Likewise, there is evidence of considerable awareness and interest by kindergarteners towards progressive education ideals, and contact with nursery school innovations in Britain and America from the 1930s. 'Free play' became the principal practice of progressivism in early childhood, although there were a range of rationales for why free play should be a key part of the programme, and considerable variation in the extent and degree of free play deemed appropriate. The idea first emerged at the turn of the century from American kindergarten reformers who were critical of Froebellian practice (Dewey 1900; Hall 1911). The first mention of free play in New Zealand is surprisingly early and appears in 1912 as a 20 minutes time slot amidst a tightly timetabled

kindergarten programme of teacher directed group activities (Christison 1965). Throughout the next thirty years the time allowed for 'free play' expanded sometimes to 35 minutes (Cosson 1970), an indication that the idea was not sufficiently attractive to overturn the existing kindergarten regimen of order and direction. In the 1930s New Zealand kindergarteners still saw their aims for children as developing "good habits", "self control", and a "sense of responsibility" and a "cooperative spirit", although by 1940s these traits were carefully couched in psychological rationales, and it was acknowledged that free play should allow for children to "develop their general abilities and interests" (Grenfell 1940). Kindergarten teachers were initiating changes along progressive lines but these were mainly small scale, and they saw their programmes as "providing a balance between freedom and discipline" (Scott 1938). The substantive transformation of progressive ideas into practice did not happen until the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1949 Gwen Somerset critiqued the older regimen of timetabled play time and in her book *I Play and I Grow:* defined what she meant by free play.

> The ordinary routines of a day cut playing time into little pieces... concentrated and interested play should have nothing or no one to interrupt it. A child may build a garage for a whole afternoon if he wishes...we do not wish to see our children conditioned to a group response at this early age. His play must be free and spontaneous....The afternoon must not be divided into set "periods" where adults decide it is time for special occupations. (p.16)

This prescription, however, was not written for kindergartens but for the new playcentre movement whose people and ideas had strong progressive roots, and who provided the first alternative to the kindergarten view of what was early childhood education. Jessie's description of a kindergarten programme of the 1940s was typical. Children were organised into three groups according to age - the 'tinnies', 'middles' and 'tops':

> *Each activity lasted about 20 minutes. The session ran from 9 - 12 and it was divided into times for different things. We had handwork. The children had to sit down at tables and do activities like sewing. Then they had the blocks to play with and they had the dolls corner. There would be books; they had a table of jigsaws, they had painting easels and crayons but each activity was only for a certain period...They had to stay a certain time, at the activity and then move to something else...Then they'd have morning tea and they all had to sit down and were not allowed to walk around. Oh yes! and the toileting. They had to go to the toilet and they would all be herded into the bathroom and they had to sit on the floor, whether they wanted to go or not, they had to sit on the floor and then they had to wash their hands. They had to take it in turns. You see it was 20 minutes this and 20 minutes that and 20 minutes, you know.*

While there was a range of activities in the programme, the ethos was of timetabled kindly order, and of instilling good habits.

> *It was about manners, grace in some kindergartens, making sure that people said, "Excuse me please," and a lot of emphasis on social graces.*
>
> Brenda

Kindergartens were at the time run by local Associations, but not of parents:

The kindergartens were run by these ladies. It was their good work, but these people were coming in and telling us what to do.

Jessie

Kindergarten teachers, most of whom were young, and all of whom were unmarried, often found it hard to initiate change against a tendency for conservatism by the married matrons of the Associations, as Geraldine recalled:

It was very difficult because a lot of committees had people on them for a long time, and for a young teacher it was very threatening. When I went to Dunedin, the secretary of my Mother's Club had been secretary for twenty-six years.

In 1947 the Bailey Report recommended a much increased financial investment by Government in preschool education and heralded the beginning of more direct government involvement in kindergartens. In 1948 Miss Moria Gallagher was appointed by the Director of Education, Dr C.E. Beeby, as the first Preschool Officer in the Department of Education. Beeby was a long time advocate of progressive educational ideals and had been appointed to his position ten years earlier by a Labour Government in tune with his ideas, as were successive Governments in the postwar years. Beeby was convinced that you had to reform the education system from the bottom up and wanted to give more support to preschool education (Beeby 1989). Moira Gallagher's brief from Beeby was to 'free up the kindergartens' (May 1992). Miss Gallagher, an infant school teacher who had first run an activity based programme with her five year old infants in 1926, travelled up and down New Zealand visiting kindergartens:

The kindergartens were masterpieces of organisation...The children were divided into groups...They had morning talk and singing together then lavatory, handwashing, morning tea, finger play, painting or plasticine. All things went in rotation. So that all four groups didn't end up in the lavatories together, some had to start the day in the lavatory and then they all swapped. The children were not crying or miserable but you had turned them into parcels.

This description, is not just one of Departmental disapproval but matches many others from kindergarten teachers themselves, and shows a programme dominated by time, age and set activities. The reaction from kindergarteners to more Government involvement was somewhat cautious, even when it brought a considerable release from money worries for the Kindergarten Associations:

The kindergarten people, up to a point, didn't want any government involvement. I can remember when the announcement of Miss Gallagher's appointment was made. We didn't know her. I remember thinking "Being paid by government—how humiliating," because we weren't going to be government servants—we were private enterprise people! It wasn't a profession for a person to be working in government.

Beverley

Miss Gallagher had decided that no real change in the programmes would happen unless kindergarten teachers were placed on a more professional

employment footing which resulted in increased pay and conditions as the first step towards a national pay scale, and later a union. Up until this time the almost missionary ethic of being a kindergarten teacher was much to the fore.

The next few years were ones of considerable change in kindergartens, caused partly by massive expansion to meet the demand of the postwar baby boom. This scenario, however, focuses on the programme changes that were going hand in hand with this. Government had no official role in dictating the programme. There was just Miss Gallagher who visited kindergartens, influenced those ready to listen, and supported those teachers, of whom there were a quite few, who were making changes or wanted to make changes. Here are some reactions of the time:

She said, "Yes, you let the children free". I talked it over with the girls I was working with and we let the children free.

Helen: Just like that? You must've been easily persuaded then.

I didn't need any persuasion, I just let them free because it was more natural.

Helen: How did you let the children free? What did you do to let the children free?

We didn't have a timetable we just let them free, let them do what they wanted to. We let the big boys go out. You could see them sitting on the mat bored to tears, bored absolutely bored and we let them free these big boys. Well they played outside, nearly all morning and the difference in them! We even let them got to the toilet when they wanted to.

Jessie

Jessie had had considerable contact with progressive ideas and Miss Gallagher gave official support to something she had long wanted to do. Other teachers had similar stories of support:

I can remember Moira Gallagher coming visiting saying, "You can't possibly work in skirts in this condition. I give you permission to wear corduroy trousers, provided they match."

May

Moria Gallagher came to see me. She said one interesting thing. "Now you don't have to be traditional. You can do your own thing. You can explore other areas." And I did. I had begun to free up a lot more. We just did things a lot freer rather than dragging them from one activity to another when they were in the middle of doing something.

Geraldine

But not everyone was poised for change. Mary did not like being told what to do and didn't:

One of the things I was told to do was to loosen up the programme to the extent that it was going to be chaos and it was going to be difficult. It wasn't what we were used to doing. They were doing this in Australia and in other countries.

Helen: What was this thing you were you being told to do?

They were having creative play going on from nine till twelve, indoor and outdoor play with little organisation or mat periods for the beginning and end. It was, in my opinion, something that was difficult to comprehend and I found it difficult to

accept and I wasn't going to be told. So at the end of 1950 I retired from kindergarten teaching.

Mary, however, was not totally opposed to new educational ideas:

They were basically good educationally, but they were bringing them in too quickly and we were being talked at. The changes were being justified as informality and creativity, but to the extreme. But, in retrospect, we didn't comprehend the value as teachers. Some of us didn't quite accept the way we were being told.

Mary did return to kindergarten teaching after a trip overseas, and found hat the changes had happened anyway and would have to be accepted, but here were some limits to her accommodation.

But morning tea all together I felt was important, and that was one of the last changes that I succumbed to...I agreed to give it a go! But indeed I didn't. I wasn't happy with it because I felt the grace was important...I was one of the last ones to go for morning tea being voluntary. It didn't work of course!

Mary rallied her parents into the fray to support her resistance. She saw a group morning tea as an important social coming together. The formality of kindergarten morning tea and mat times were obviously touchy subjects, but symbolised differing perceptions of where the boundary lay between order and freedom:

Another thing I instituted was free milk time—that you could have your milk and apple more or less as you wished...Often I'd get kids to set the table. We'd have place mats and flowers and all the jugs out, and they would pour their own. That created quite a hullabaloo.

Lesley

Joyce, was already experimenting with more choice in the programme but she had limits as to how far she was prepared to go:

In 1948 I introduced something where we bought all the children together before they could choose what to play with...I can remember Miss Gallagher coming down and she was very taken to think that the children were having the freedom of choice, but then she tried to break me from bringing the children together. I liked to bring the children together. That was the one contact that we all had together. Might've only been for a few minutes just to talk about things that were going on,.

To say that the introduction of programmes where children could choose and play freely was caused by Miss Gallagher's visits on behalf of the Department of Education is simplistic, but there is no doubt that her 'top down' support role was important in galvanising teachers into action who were already primed theoretically. Kindergarteners were influenced by happenings in the playcentre movement, although they were sometimes wary at the degree of freedom allowed in playcentre (McDonald 1993). Teachers mentioned new early childhood development knowledge, and reading the books of Susan Isaacs, particularly *The Nursery Years* (1929), and Benjamin Spock (1946). They also named other teachers and people who had influenced them. For example:

Stewart (Elizabeth) Hamilton introduced us to the ideas of Susan Isaacs. She had been to England and studied with Susan Isaacs (1936-8). She came back from

England and Oh she inflamed everybody and everything. And down here in Dunedin we used to hear about all these lively people and their lively ideas.

Jessie

The main thrust in this first wave of freedom was the abandonment of the timetabled activities and age groupings. Instead teachers placed activities on table tops and allowed free access to the various areas of play such as paint, dough, family corner, books etc., and outdoors there was sand, water, carpentry and climbing frames etc. There was no great change in the actual activities but rather children had considerably more personal choice, less interruptions and there was less formal group times. What did change dramatically was the role of the teacher. This seemed to be a hit and miss thing as teachers sought to redefine what they should be doing.

Did you play with the children?

But in those days you didn't play with children—you were just observing and supervising them. I can remember being told off in my kindergarten for getting into the sandpit!

Hester

Were you a facilitator?

We used to see that they weren't harming themselves, that they were occupied and we gave them things and sat with them at the tables, read them stories. I know we use to be very busy with them.

Jessie

Did it get out of hand?

Well it was just letting the children do what they wanted, literally. We put everything out. We didn't really know how to handle it. I don't think looking back. So we became a little authoritarian, when we wanted to intervene. I can remember sending children to the office, who weren't fitting into what I thought was the right pattern, so I wasn't really doing what I would call free play now. We didn't really understand children's behaviour enough to know what we should be doing during that first year and the next year particularly.

Marion

How much did you interact?

As the children moved around we talked with them and looking for the right moment to talk with the child about what he/she was doing. Looking for the right moment to add something else and I think those were the keys to it, really. There were some people of course who were coming in and saying, "Oh no!" We know we came in for a bit of flak there was no question about that. I think we worked it through. When we came to see the results we saw how differently the children were coping. Sure there were one or two places where there was little contact between children and staff and I think the staff were seen as being very much in the background.

Freda

Each teacher was applying theory to practice. Some teachers were clearer about the philosophical rationale for what they were doing; for others it was

more of a gut reaction that this was a better way to work with children but were not too certain what they were doing. In time too, a so called free play programme became the 'recipe' you were taught and just followed. For some kindergarten teachers, however, it was all too much:

> *One teacher I had working for me thought I was just crazy and asked the Association for a transfer.*
>
> Marion

And there were teachers who just carried on regardless of Miss Gallagher or anyone suggested, as Hester saw when she was a young teacher in the mid 1950s:

> *I was trained in the very formal time when in the North Island there was much more free play, as it used to be called. People looked on this free play as being open slather; that the kids could do what they liked. But in the kindergarten I first went to the timetable still worked around one group outside playing formal games; the other group would be having a story and the other group would be having music and then it would circulate round until everybody washed their hands for morning tea. The children didn't elect what they would do in the same way as they would do today. Incidental learning didn't happen in quite the same way as it does today.*

Despite Hester's experience and much individual variation in how free play programmes were managed, this scenario shows a quite dramatic curriculum transformation in a fairly short period of time. This required a considerable degree of consensus between education policy, theory, and the individual motivation of teachers. This small snapshot scenario of policy and practice in action has many other strands, but captured like this provides many clues to the crux of theoretical debates and political processes in education as they were happening. In this case it shows the complex interplay of 'top down' support (and even direction) with reactions from teachers 'below' ranging from ready enthusiasm to walk out. As a backdrop to the scenario was the lessening of power and influence of the local Kindergarten Associations and Committees; a more interventionist government with some money in hand; kindergarten training programmes now funded by Government; parents moving onto Committees; and the first in service training for teachers. This was leading to the emergence of a more confident group of teachers who seemed less cautious than their predecessors in initiating changes from the grassroots. By the late 1950s teachers like Angela were poised for further change:

> *While the children had a choice, the children didn't actually have an influence in the programme, so if the children had any sort of experience the day before, and came into the kindergarten full of excitement and wanted to express this excitement, well the teachers at that time did not actually pick up on it and structure the programme to build around children's experiences.*

This was a much more pro active view of progressivism to do with rights and autonomy. Some teachers like Angela were later affected by the new political and pedagogical mood of freedom and liberation of the 1960s, and consequently set about testing the limits of necessary order in the kindergarten, and questioning old assumptions. Cumulatively this dissatisfaction

became an explosion as teachers like Angela began to dismantle the many unwritten rules of kindergarten programme:

> *We set up the shelves in the storeroom where kids could actually move in and out and decide what sort of junk they wanted. I guess I was empowering kids at that time and allowing kids to make choices. We used to make up just the mixture of starch or cornflower and we gave the children the dyes and paint and they were able to make up their own - they could decide all the colours, so kids were learning. That's when I first introduced being called by my Christian name and that was quite radical in those days.*

This story of grassroots activism is the data of another scenario debate in a later period of time. These scenarios of oral herstory are presented as raw data to reveal the debates as practiced by teachers. In the process of the construction of our historical analysis the debate is the starting point, before being placed in a broader context of known educational theories of the time, set against historical 'texts' that might exist, and also placed alongside events in the wider education sector and viewpoints of teachers in other early childhood services and sectors. The quest is to construct a history of education 'through the eyes of teachers'. We are interested in such questions as where do teachers' ideas come from? How do teachers respond to the smorgasbord of theories to which they are exposed in the course of a life-time? What range of educational ideas have various groups of teachers encountered; What theories or combinations of theories do teachers take on board and which do they reject and why? How do teachers across the different age levels or institutions interpret their role with children and how has this changed through time? Why do some theories and not others 'take' with particular individuals and groups at particular times and in particular settings? And finally, what have the teachers of the past got to say about their experiences and knowledge to the students of today? Can such debates provide a range of 'theories in action' and 'theories in conflict' towards assisting student teachers to appraise their own practice and ideas; to help them formulate, articulate, create and debate their own theoretical positions?

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